Some reflections on cross-cultural interviewing

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It is not my intention in this paper to give a thorough analysis of the problems of interviewing in a cross-cultural context. My purpose is to reflect on some problems I encountered in different stages of cross-cultural interviewing in my own work and in an example cited by L.E. Thomas (1995). The first example derives from my experience of collecting data in relation to the research practice and the meta-scientific opinions of third-generation Symbolic Interactionists in the USA. In this example, I want to illustrate the problems of a researcher who is more or less familiar with the language and culture of the inteviewee but who is not really a member of that culture. The second example is taken from an experience I had with one of my doctoral students in Brazil who was working on a thesis on school management. In this example, the researcher had only a passive knowledge of Portuguese (he could read and understand a little spoken Portuguese), but the interviews were conducted by the doctoral student, who spoke the language and was familiar with the Brazilian culture but had been born in India (Goa) and had received his education in India and Europe. The researcher knew the culture only from reading and conversation with local people. The third example, cited by Thomas, is about interviewing an Indian Swami with a totally different cultural background from that of the interviewer. The Swami spoke English, as did the interviewer, and the interviewer was helped by a native research assistant and an interpreter.

Without doubt, the cultures of the interviewer and the interviewees in the three cases are very different. Although these examples are clear as far as cultural differences are concerned, it should be stressed that cross-cultural interviewing might touch on other situations as well. It, therefore, makes sense to begin by asking what we mean by 'cross-cultural'.

Second, I will describe the three cases. Three problems will be discussed: 1) the preparation of the interview; 2) the interviewing process: mainly problems of creating good rapport, and problems of understanding during the interview; and 3) problems of interpretation.

Third, I will discuss how these problems may be interpreted by taking into account the analysis of the understanding of everyday life as conceived by Schutz and Luckmann (1974) and by Thomas (1995).

1. What is a cross-cultural context?

When I recently conducted a project on the process of choice of study of 12-to 14-year-olds from working class and poor families, one of my collaborators was struck by the unexpected reactions and opinions of some of the families he interviewed. The patterns of thinking, the values, and the behaviour patterns sometimes differed greatly from what he was used to as the son of a middle-class family and as a university graduate. He spoke the same language as the interviewees, although these families used a dialect he was not familiar with. This indicates not only that interviewing in a cross-cultural context is a language problem but also how important language might be as a cultural vehicle establishing mutual understanding between the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviewing in a cross-cultural context may not simply be defined as a situation in which the culture of the interviewer and the interviewee differ. Not all cultural differences have the same influence on the interview situation, and, even when the culture of both interviewer and interviewee is very similar, it is often a challenge for the interviewer to come to grips with the meaning of the language and the behaviour of the interviewee.

This problem becomes obvious when we look at the vast range of factors included in the definition of culture, a concept with many meanings. Jim Thomas (1993: 12) refers to culture as "the totality of all learned social behaviour of a given group" it provides the "systems of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting" (Goodenough, 1981: 110) and the rules and the symbols of interpretation and discourse". It also includes the material and symbolic artifacts of behaviour, such as belief systems, conceptual machinery for ordering social arrangements, and pre-existing structural and material attributes. With this definition in mind, we may expect that many interviewers will encounter parts of cultures alien to them. Indeed an investigator studying political behaviour or the behaviour of workers on an assembly line or the behaviour of prisoners may well be working in a cross-cultural context. Indeed, it is very rare for a researcher to have had experience in parliament or on an assembly line or in prison that would give him or her a valid picture of the culture of these institutions. Thus, a cross-cultural context should not be defined simply as a difference between the culture of the interviewee and the interviewer but should be approached as a continuous gradient of differences between the culture of the two parties. Of course, some cultural differences are easier to bridge than others, and it is uopn the bridging that the validity and plausibility of the data and consequently the analysis depends.

2. Interviewing in three different cross-cultural contexts

Unstructured interviews are, according to Burgess (1984: 102-103), 'conversations with a purpose' in which 'the researcher is a friend and a confidant, who shows interest, understanding and sympathy in the life of the person with whom a conversation occurs'. Immediately he adds that 'this style of interviewing cannot be started without detailed knowledge and preparation', and he agrees with Zweig that 'it is essential to observe people before a detailed conversation can occur'. It is this kind of interview that I will examine in three very different contexts. I will describe first the preparation of the interviews, then, the process of interviewing, and finally, some of the problems that arise with analysis. For each of these stages, I will use my symbolic interactionist study (I will call it the American case), my Brazilian case, and the Indian case of L.E. Thomas (1995).

2.1. The preparation of the interviews

Methodologists do not agree on the way an unstructured interview should be prepared. Herbert Blumer (1969) contends that a researcher should approach the field of research with an open mind. The literature might influence the way researchers look at the phenomena, and so they should go into the field and try to examine it without preset categories. This is not accepted by many others, and I doubt whether it is possible to exclude knowledge-at-hand or even whether it is wise to try to do so. Indeed, McCracken (1988: 31) maintains that reviewing the literature, benefits more than it harms. After all, he argues, it can give the researcher a critical insight into 'the conscious and unconscious assumptions of scholarly enterprises' and helps him or her to construct a questionnaire.
Since the three projects I am discussing concern different fields of study, the preparation of the interviews also differed.

2.1.1. The American case

The purpose of this project was to study the links between European Interpretative Sociology and American Symbolic Interactionism. I was interested in the theory, the methodology, and the meta-scientific assumptions of the generation of Symbolic Interactionists who were trained by Herbert Blumer. Moreover, I wanted to learn about the social structure and the social networks in which this approach came to be developed and how these sociologists interpreted Symbolic Interactionist theory and methodology. In order to do this, I set out to review the work of the Symbolic Interactionists. I had the advantage having had Tamotsu Shibutani, a student of Herbert Blumer, as mentor when I was working at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1980. Moreover, in previous projects, I was also familiar with methodology and with the philosophy of science, which would cover a substantial part of the interview. Relying on this literature I prepared an interview schedule for the respondents, which was adjusted in function of their commitments. What began as an advantage, later became a problem. Some of my questions were inspired by my philosophical and methodological reading and seemed to confuse some of my respondents because they were not used to this language.

As far as the structure of American society and universities was concerned, the only introduction I had, was some short visits to the USA, my reading, talks with American friends, and a four-month stay in Santa Barbara before I started interviewing. But again, I could rely on information from Tom Shibutani in relation to university life and his knowledge of the Chicago scene at the end of the 1940s. He also had good relationships with most of these scholars, and it was sufficient for me to mention his name and the purpose of my project to be granted access for the interview.

Knowledge of the English language was also important for this project. English is not my mother tongue, but because I had read a great deal in English and had some experience of speaking English, I was prepared to do my own interviewing, although I have to admit that my vocabulary was not always sufficient to understand immediately what the interviewee wanted to express. Since the interviewees were aware of my limitations, they were often prepared to adapt their phrasing.

2.1.2. The Brazilian case

In 1987, I had the privilege of teaching for a month at the University of Curitiba (Parana) in Brazil, and I took the opportunity to do field work with one of my former doctoral students, who had worked under my direction in Leuven for several years on curriculum development in Brazilian secondary schools. In the meantime, I was working on a project about school management in Belgium. As he had had some difficulties with his fieldwork, we thought it might be interesting to do some work together and write a comparative article on Belgian and Brazilian school management. My visit could bring us together in the field, give me a better understanding of the problems he was confronting, and provide me with a better understanding of the Brazilian educational system. During the time he was in our department, he told me about the Brazilian educational system and I was familiar with his research design. This was not sufficient for fieldwork in Brazil. In order to do it properly I had to study Portuguese. At the time I arrived in Brazil, I had a passive knowledge of the language, but not enough to understand a conversation with ease. Consequently, I had to rely on my doctoral student to do the

interviewing. We prepared the interview schedule together in English, but it was his task to conduct the interviews in Portuguese. I would accompany him and intervene in the interviews only when it was necessary. It is important to know in this context that he was born and educated in Goa and also had worked in Portugal and that Portuguese was the language he was accustomed to speaking.

One problem was that the time was too short to do all interviewing while I was there, so we agreed that he would continue the field work when I returned to Belgium. One of his students contacted the headmasters of four schools in Curitiba, and all of them were willing to meet us. The aim of this initial contact was to form some general ideas about the school and school management.

Two remarks should be made in relation to the preparation of these interviews. First, although I had some knowledge of the Brazilian education system, the time I spent in Curitiba (one month, and only one visit to each school) was too short to familiarize myself substantially with Brazilian school life. Second, even when we delegate the interview to a native speaker, an active knowledge of the local language is needed to prepare and properly understand an interview in a cross-cultural context.

2.1.3. The Indian case

L.E. Thomas (1995) was interested in the question "why some people, as they grow older, become fearful and bitter, while others, who suffer the same physical insults and personal losses, age gracefully?". He found that the elderly in England and in India who had a world view in which there was room for a transcendent dimension were more likely to age gracefully. As he wanted to collect more data in relation to this problem he went to India to interview and observe a dozen religious renunciates in Varanasi, the sacred city of Hinduism. L.E. Thomas is an American professor of human development and family relations and a devout Quaker. He was acquainted with the Vedic world view, had studied yoga, and practiced Hindu meditation techniques. But even with this preparation, Thomas admitted that he found the beliefs of Swami Tananda strange and personally repugnant.

Swami Tananda was an Indian, seventy years old, who spoke fluent English, was trained in western science, and had taught in a government college before his retirement as a Swami in a Shiva temple. In spite of his knowledge of western science and thinking, he was strongly opposed to western ideas. He had been a follower of Swami Kapatri, who had fought, for cow protection, maintenance of the caste system, and so on.

In order to do the interviewing, Thomas was assisted by a local research assistant and an interpreter. They gave him a good deal of interesting data, although he did not need them to interview Swami Tananda. It is also not clear whether Thomas had prepared a list of questions to conduct the interviews.

2.2. The interviewing

As with other unstructured interviews, cross-cultural interviews should take place in a sphere of openness and understanding. Already from the start, an interviewer should show that he is interested in all kinds of information the interviewee can provide, and there is no reason whatsoever that the interviewee will lose face when some answers do not fit the ideas of the interviewer. Important here is not only the words spoken by the interviewee but also the body language (McCracken, 1988: 38). The interviewer needs to be aware of the influence of his or her attitudes towards the interviewee.

The three projects developed in a very different way, as will be shown.

2.2.1. Interviewing in the USA

My contact with the interviewees in this project was very friendly. Most of the people I wanted to visit were willing to co-operate, and most of them offered a day or more for me to do the interviewing. Some of them even invited me to stay in their home. I will illustrate my work by describing the circumstances of three interviews.

G.P. Stone invited me to stay with him in Hudson, Minnesota. I arrived in the afternoon before the interview, and Greg came and met me at the airport in Minneapolis. It was the first time I had ever met him, but he was very cordial. The night before the interview I spent together with Greg and his wife and had dinner in a local restaurant. At the end of dinner, Greg took me to the kitchen and asked me to watch the people in the kitchen. It was the end of the evening and the cook knew Greg. They enjoyed the fact that Greg was once more doing one of his experiments with a foreigner. In the meantime, Greg was trying to convince me that this kind of observation was real sociology. Although I had never met him before, at the end of that day I had the feeling that I had known him for a long time. It took only a few hours before he was regaling me with stories about the university, colleagues, and scientific organizations.

It was my intention to start my interview at 9 a.m. the next day, but Greg gave me some other papers of his to read, and it was almost noon before we began. We had no break for lunch. Between us we had a carton of beer, which was all we had until 5 p.m. when Gladys, his wife, came home from the university. The interview was only interrupted by phone calls and problems with Greg's tape recorder. Like me, he wanted to tape the interview. I spent another night in his house, during which Greg discussed his plans to start a project in Costa Rica and invited me to be his associate.

The interview with Howard Becker was different. I conducted it at his summer residence in San Francisco, and apart from the interview we had lunch together with his wife. I did not have the same opportunity to observe him or to chat about other things as I did with Greg Stone. Because he was one of the latest on my list (he wanted me to come to San Francisco in the summer), he was already informed by his friends about the content of my interview ("it's going to be fun, and difficult"). My introduction was very short. The interview went very smoothly, and I had the feeling that all the themes I intended to discuss could be covered.

Elliot Freidson invited me to come to his office at N.Y.U.. The place of the interview was, in comparison with the others, formal, and he had planned other tasks the same day apart from seeing me. It was a friendly meeting but much shorter than the others, probably because Freidson was not particulary fond of Symbolic Interactionism as it was linked to the work of Herbert Blumer. There was not very much time for an informal introduction. I could ask the questions I wanted, but I knew that the time was limited. Consequently, my questions became shorter, and the data I collected was less than in the other interviews.

Although the interviews went smoothly, the cultural differences between the interviewer and the interviewees had consequences for the interview situation. This will be illustrated in the next section when I analyse some parts of the transcripts. As far as rapport between the interviewer and interviewees was concerned, I had the feeling that this did not influence cultural differences for the worse; probably, the interviewer being a foreigner made it easier to speak about 'hot topics'.

2.2.2. Interviewing in Brazil

Four schools were contacted by the research assistant, and in three of them we conducted the interviews with the headmaster as was promised. In one of the schools, the headmaster had no time to see us, but delegated the interview to two deputy heads and a secretary. In all the schools, the interviewees were very kind and gave us the opportunity to visit the school. They asked us why a Belgian came to visit the school and were very honoured by the visit. As I have indicated, my inability to speak fluent Portuguese and easily understand the local accent was a big handicap during the interview. I was supposed to intervene when the questioning was weak. Sometimes I did, but it was certainly not enough according to the interview transcripts. Actually, this was not a big problem for the project because these interviews were only a first step in the fieldwork. On the other hand, I could not offer my collaborator a good example of interviewing.

In conclusion, we can say that the quality of the interviewing was influenced by the lack of a sufficient knowledge of the local language by one of the interviewers. Moreover the short time I had to familiarise myself with the field hindered my understanding of it and made it impossible for me to be critical enough towards the data collected: e.g., one of the headmasters offered dubious information, and it was only after the interview that I was aware of it. This experience convinced me that cross-cultural interviewing is only possible when interviewee and interviewer have common knowledge (for similar problems see Cicourel, 1974, and for problems of translation see Werner, Schoepfle, 1987: 354-379).

2.2.3. The Indian case

L.E. Thomas (1995) does not give very much information about the course of his interviews. We only know that these interviews took several months and that the interviews with Swami Tananda occurred in a friendly atmosphere, even when the Swami was denying mutual respect to the interviewer as a human being. Indeed, Thomas contends that even the denial of his humanity by Tananda was no reason for him to stop interviewing, as he believes that he was able to understand Tananda correctly.

2.3. Problems of interpretation

The three examples show that cross-cultural interviewing is possible but only when certain conditions are met. The Brazilian case, although the information was interesting, shows how language is very important for obtaining a good understanding of the situation. It also shows that an investigator needs a reasonable period of time in order to become familiar with the field. Since this was not present in the Brazilian case, the following analysis will be confined to the American and the Indian case.

2.3.1. The American case

In this case, it is important to remember that I started this project after I had done some work from a methodological standpoint and from the standpoint of the philosophy of science. This influenced my questioning in that I tried to push my interviewees to take a stand in relation to points of discussion that were considered important in the philosophical literature. Doing this, I had forgotten that most of the interviewees were not much interested in fundamental methodological problems but were more eager to do empirical work.

The first quotation shows that G.P. Stone was stimulated to reflect on the concepts realism and idealism. His answer shows that he was not acquainted with these concepts in a technical sense (Greek concepts) (see Stone a). He stresses his empirical stance but did not follow the interviewer when he wanted him to choose between falsification and verification, after he had declared himself to be much more adept at falsification although in his books he seemed to be more interested in verification (see Stone b). He also refused to think about himself as having assumptions that might influence his work. In the same quotation, it is obvious that a person who is not accustomed to working with a foreign language (German) becomes confused, even when this language is used in relation to ideas he himself has formulated. After all, Stone had translated some of Schmallenbach's work from German into English.

A similar reaction was demonstrated by Eliot Freidson. He was aware of the presuppositions, but admitted that he did not pay them much attention. And when he was pushed to put himself in the tradition of American Pragmatism he was very outspoken about his limited knowledge of Pragmatism. He also refused to discuss his position toward realism and idealism, and suggested that nobody cares except when you care about 'words' not about 'action'.

Not much difference may be found in the response of Howard S. Becker on the question of what he considered to be truth. Becker also refused to follow the interviewer in his philosophical approach and started to speak about 'credibility, believability'.

In relation to these statements we can ask whether this refusal by the interviewees has to do with the American background or with their typical views about doing research. Whatever the answer may be, it is obvious that interviewer and interviewee came to a good understanding of each others opinion.

G.P. Stone (a)

"I: What is your stance against...? When you are speaking about society, or about persons, do you see them as a reality ? Or just as an imagination of research ?

GS: Well I think imaginations are real. So I have no problem.

I: Oh. Uhhmm. (shared laughter). It destroys my classical, perhaps Greek concepts. There is always this difference between idealism and realism. (laughter).

GS: Oh yes. Well, I mean I really got into this in the study of clothing, you know. Because people talk about mere appearances. You know, or it's merely an appearance. These appearances are quite real. (laughter).

I: Now let's go on and...

GS: You see at bottom, damnit, I'm an empiricist.

I: Yes, I see. In this sense you are realistic. Now I have here some special questions in relation to some of your articles. Mmmm.. pause.
That's perhaps an analysis of the facts. At a certain moment you said in your article about "Über den Umgang mit Motiven.": "In diesem Artikel wollen wir es jedoch vermeiten mit Unterstellungen oder Gegenunterstellungen zu jonglieren...". So you can have the idea that when you have written this sentence that you said we have no assumptions in sociology. But I think that's not right, that's the wrong...

GS: Well that's because you know, because your Greek, and uhmm.. I'm currently having an argument with Herb [Blumer] about this. Of course there are always some assumptions. You can always find them, you know. The question is whether they really are an important part of what you are doing. Sometimes they are and sometimes they are not. Now, what's the context of that statement, you know?

I: The context. I'd better take the article and see.

GS: It must have to do with whether there is some underlying motive, or something like that.

GS: You might say it to me in English because my German is not, you know, it would take me time.

(Tape change. Second side of tape)

I: Now, this citation I gave to you is about the introductory part of your article about "Über den Umgang mit Motiven".

GS: Yes, yes, uhm.

I: And what you are saying is that you give an analysis of different stances of other authors, and you say that you don't want to join the stance of these persons because you want to check that.

GS: Yes.

I: So, my point was, uhh, was that have also a kind of stance in that sense that you said we don't agree with assumptions, we just want to be empirical. Is that the explanation I must give?

GS: That's what I am saying. You know the reason that I am upset and destroying all (laughter), all this equipment is because I've never been pressed this far, you know. And I'm wondering whether I have some basic assumptions. I like to think I don't.

I: You like to think you haven't?

GS: Yes.

I: But do you think that's a realistic statement?
GS: No. Of course not. You know what I like is not necessarily reality" (Verhoeven, 1980c: 14-16).

G.P. Stone (b)

"I: Must I say then, that development of science is more, or your view of developing science is more to formulate hypotheses, or to formulate new questions for scientists, rather than saying this is now the end of...
GS: Oh yes. Definitely. The problem is, why I even state in the beginning of that book which I wrote, you know? That science is the graveyard of theories, but the problems continue. (laughter) Which is fascinating.
I: Now. May I bring in the philosophy of science, speaking about...
GS: No. I'd rather you didn't. (laughter)
I: But is there any moment? Was there any moment that you said I have to look to the work of Popper, or is there any relationship? You don't have any?
GS: No. What happens to me in that respect, you know. Several people told me to look at Popper, you know. And I know at the same time that Popper is very fashionable. Now I tend to despise fashion. Now that what happens is sometimes I'm wrong. He's fashionable for the right reason. He should be. So I shall read Popper. Not because I want to read Popper or anything like that, or to fit my ideas, but because so many people tell me that I have to read Popper. (laughter) So I will read Popper to satisfy them and myself, or something. I'm not sure it will greatly affect my approach to the problems. It may. It may. In some cases I think particularly in the cases of art, you know, I have put off Bartok for a long time because he was fashionable, and everybody said I should be listening to Bartok instead of what I was listening to. So then after all that left, I kind of sneaked in and listened to Bartok. Now I have all the Bartok that's around, picking up a lot of it in Yugoslavia by the way.
I: Yes. I know you have to listen to Bartok but it's hard for me to do that. I prefer more of the classical...
GS: But you see what I mean?
I: Yes. It's more efficient. But you are not impressed or there was no influence of Popper's thinking.
GS: With what?
I: You were not impressed by the thinking of Popper about falsification. I can't see traces in your work either.
GS: Well, I should read Popper. I mean I must read Popper.
I: Because its standpoint is that we, just like you say, science is nothing else than a graveyard of theories. So that's his standpoint too, in a certain sense.
GS: Yes.
I: But what he is saying is that we are falsifying, and what I see in your work, is that you are looking for verifications in a certain sense. Am I right?
GS: Looking for what?
I: Verifications. Verifications.
GS: Yes. yes." (Verhoeven, 1980c: 26-28)

E. Freidson

"I: Now speaking about these presuppositions. What kind of presuppositions do you use in your work in relation to the person, and in relation to society.

EF: I don't use any consciously.

I: (laughter) Not at all? You have no presuppositions?

EF: No conscious presuppositions. No. No formal ones.

I: Except that fact that you mentioned some presuppositions in structural and common sense individualist stances (in his book *'Professional Dominance: the social structure of medical care*'). There you see clearly some presuppositions but according to your answer you don't have them at all, clearly.

EF: No. I'm not formally preoccupied with them. I'm sure they are there. Whether they are consistent or not is another question and I wouldn't be surprised if they were inconsistent because it depends on the problem. And what I happen to be thinking about at the time. Or what I happen to read at the time.

I: Is this stance part of your pragmatical stance? American pragmatism?

EF: Yes but again it's not formal pragmatism. I've never read anything about pragmatism. Well I guess I read Mead in the "History of Movements in 19th Century Thought". That was years ago." (Verhoeven, 1980b: 7).

"I: Is there any question in your mind when you are doing your work that you are approaching society starting from society as a totality. Or that you start approaching society as an amalgamation or an addition of separate individuals. Or is that problem also one of those problems you say, I don't bother. I don't worry about these things. It's of no importance to me.

EF: Well, it's very difficult to say. I can't say it's of no importance and I don't worry about it if only because reading other people's work and dealing with questions about my own. Although the latter is of less important than reading other people's work which raises questions. Inevitably uh, you know one thinks of um, is concerned with those things in one way or another. But there is no consciously, formally, worked out set of ideas that I use to guide me.

There is a sense of if you'll forgive me, the sense of the world insofar as I have been involved with doing research involving real human beings. Probably I generalize more from my experience with real human being, and I suppose, personal experience than is wise although I don't know what else to use. In feeling connected with reality rather than preoccupied with abstractions created by a very limited and isolated section of reality, namely groups of intellectuals of whom I am inherently suspicious. I'm not sure I've answered your question.

I: In a certain sense you have touched on things that I am looking for but uh, it's not necessary to use the same terminology like I am doing. I see that in a certain sense that you have a more realistic inclination than..

EF: By all means. If I, … well part of my feelings that formalizing these things, in a sense, polarizes them also. I cannot accept a philosophical realist position any more than I can accept a philosophical idealist position. If I were absolutely forced to choose I suppose that I would have to support realism, certainly my tendency is in that direction. But I resent the necessity of choosing and I think they are created by words. There may be some critical points I suppose in which a choice has to be made. By and large I think the necessity of

choice is created by people who are occupied with words, not with action. And an action, anyone would be an imbecile adopting a purely idealistic, or a purely realistic situation. I mean everything we see about us -- you know both are involved in the world. But as I say certainly if I have to choose and I would resent the necessity it would certainly be toward the direction of realism. Hume is far more compatible to me than Descartes. Without a doubt. (Verhoeven, 1980b: 8-9).

H.S. Becker

"I: Now, do you mean that within these discussions about truth and so on. It's hard for a sociologist to get truth, is truth something...

HB: See. I didn't say truth (laughter). That's the point: I didn't say truth. I don't know what I think about truth. I know that's a tangled, philosophical business before I could say anything about it I would have to read about fifty books that I haven't read. I don't say truth. Maybe some day I will read all these books and get into it. I do say truth in another connection about photography. Did I send that to you.

I: That's right, I do have a copy of that. That's something in which you make these analyses... of different kinds of...

HB: But it's essentially the same kind of analysis. In talking about it, it's not so much truth as credibility, believability, persuasiveness. I think of science as a branch of rhetoric in the old fashioned sense as the art of persuasion.

I: That's one of the things you are very strongly attached to. That's one of the things you are very involved in that idea of credibility in a different...

HB: Yes. I think it's a more useful way of talking about it than truth because I think of what I just said before, in your last question. What we are engaged in is persuading other people that we have found out something that they can believe, that they can depend on. Something credible. So that's why credibility, believability. I got this idea by the way from a book by a mathematician, George Polya. He wrote a book called "Mathematics and Plausible Reasoning". It's an excellent book. He adopts this view of, you know, he says look, people speak about compelling, rigourous proof. That's only in mathematics and it's only in mathematics because there is no reference to reality" (Verhoeven, 1980a: 14-15).

My starting point of approaching all publications as if they were realized on the basis of a very deep philosophical reflection could not be accepted by all interviewees. Becker, for example, opposed without hesitation when I tried to find a particular model of scientific research in a sentence in one of his books.

H.S. Becker

"I: Yes that's right. Now you see that also this kind of thinking in relation to your life and your scientific work -that you put it even in your opinion, in your view, on gathering evidence. "Evidence gathering in the most unthinking fashion is the best", you said at a certain moment. Do you mean that?

HB: Well, I don't know. That's out of context. Let's look at where it is.

I: It's page 36 (*Sociological works*). Evidence gathered in the most unthinking fashion... So

haphazard, by accident?

HB: Wait a minute. The best evidence may be that gathered in the most unthinking fashion. Because there might be less bias produced by the wish to substantiate or repudiate a particular idea.

I: The accent is on may be...?

HB: Yes. It could be.

I: It could be.

HB: That the more you plan it the more danger there is of finding what you set out to find. And the less you plan it the more likely you will find something which is actually something that could be used to disprove some favourite idea you have.

I: Yes I see. So it's more relativistic than I put it here.

HB: You see. You see what you are doing is treating these things that I say somewhat more seriously than they deserve to be treated. That's to say they are not really philosophical dictums. What they are, how shall I put it, bits of practical advice.

I: Yes but it's important to know because you know you read it from a particular stance. You try to find out in what sense a person's reasoning is going.

HB: Yes. Alright now but look you really misread that sentence. Because the whole sentence is that it might be that because and the because is, is that this way you wouldn't just find what you set out to find. You see. And that's quite different from saying, it's best to do it, I mean, the way you quoted it makes it sound as though I am recommending that you should never think. I think it's very important not to do it too early. This fellow Campbell that I mentioned, Campbell is very interested in what he calls, evolutionary epistemology. You may wonder what that is. What he means is treating ideas as having an evolutionary history in the same way that organisms do. He says that he believes that the same process as applies to Darwinian evolution applies to ideas. That's random variation in the production of ideas like mutations and selected retention, that is there are mechanisms for weeding out the unfit ideas. One of the things he says in connection with that is that science has got too good at selective retention. Weeding out ideas and not enough on producing random variation. My version of that is we shouldn't get rid of an idea too quickly. There will be plenty of time to say after all it's no good. But if you get the idea, at the same moment you get the idea you dismiss it. Oh well that's not right - everybody knows that's not right. That's a mistake - so it's better to entertain many contradictory ideas, entertain many ideas, eventually you can work them out and decide which ones to get rid of. But while you are in the process of thinking and working, no. Periodically, when you have to write it down then you have to decide, well I think this one is right or that one. Although some times you might seriously write down it could be this one it could be that one I can't make my mind up. I don't see any virtue in choosing things when you have no good basis to choose.

I: So you better say you postpone your...

HB: Or you make a provisional choice. I'll try this and see if it works. This is the pragmatic thing. It's, you know, I think the thing about systematic thinking is... It's very good in some ways, very dangerous in other ways. The danger is that if your system has a fallacy in it that you will commit that error systematically. You will. You won't just make a few mistakes, but you will make the same mistake inevitably, all the time. That's very dangerous to me." (Verhoeven, 1980a: 34-36).

It was not only the interviewer who took his own standpoint too strongly as a starting point in the interview. The interviewees also took for granted the classic American concepts or their own standpoint. This was the case in the next response from Howard S. Becker who explained to the interviewee the difference between liberals and radicals in America. Stone, on the other hand, refused to accept the concept of behavioural science because he denied the validity of the research conducted by some representatives of 'behavioural science'.

H.S. Becker

"HB: Any, uhh. You get that kind of orthodoxy built into social organization but it is bound to be bad in some ways, you know, I mean it's exactly the opposite of somebody like (Edward) Shils. He feels that you can't accomplish anything good unless you have an orthodoxy that's built into an institution and the institution is legitimate and all that. I feel - if you have legitimate institution, look out! (laughter) It's trouble. In a certain way it's like old Mao, you know? As soon as the Party gets settled down you better do something to shake it up because every kind of organization can be repressive in some way. So, uhh, yes in that sense anything that shakes things up is in that sense, radical. I don't know if I would use that language, you know, radical. It's very vague that interview was a creature of that time. That was a big issue for everyone - you can't imagine what happened in American sociology in the middle and late sixties when people were running around accusing each other of being fascists and capitalist lackeys and all this stuff. For a lot of people to be, let's say, Hubert Humphrey Democrat, they considered that equivalent to being fascist.

I: That was the attitude? Was is it a time that...

HB: Yes. Liberal was a bad word, it's still a bad word. I remember a friend of mine, Jerry Skolnick (?) who teaches Criminology, hit on the perfect way to deal with this charge. He would say: "Yes I'm a Liberal - now what?" It was very confusing because nobody would believe that anybody would accept such a description of themselves.

I: Liberal is the equal of Radical?

HB: No. I mean, the idea is, you know, I mean it's roughly the equivalent of reform and revolution. The liberal is someone who wants to change things for the better but go slow.

I: And the radical is someone who wants a revolution? From one day to the other - I see.

HB: I needn't tell you that much energy has been wasted trying to figure out the perfect radical strategy.

I: These are the people in this movement who are involved with neo-Marxism and so on? Are these the radicals?

HB: Well - now... I mean the whole thing has died away. There's barely,... I don't even know if there is something called the radical caucus anymore. There are people working within the Marxist style who are doing wonderful work - they are really interesting work, empirical work. Or not even empirical you know but uhh.. It got quite mixed up with the question of action. Should you undertake, I mean, did it mean to be radical sociologist did that require that you uhh.. you know, organize a revolutionary group and so on. Did it mean help the janitors in your university organize a strike. John Leggett who is up in Vancouver did that. He was very radical and he did that." (Verhoeven, 1980a: 22-24)

G.P. Stone

"GS: Have I really answered your question on the difference?
I: I think so. I think so. Interactive element, in that sense, there is a difference between, but sometimes... with behavioural sciences, psychology...`
GS: There's no behavioural science.
I: There's no behavioural science.
GS: No. Absolutely not.
I: But when I say behavioural sciences.
GS: No sense at all. No sense at all.
I: Why not? Explain that.
GS: Because (laughter) What is behaviour? Do I... I mean now you study behaviour as a change in motion? of the object? Physics talks about that. Talk about behaviour as some change in the organism. Biology can handle that. Must we bring physics and biology together? Do you want to do that?
I: Uu mm.
GS: Well. We have to be concerned with meaningful conduct.
I: I see.
GS: I talked to Frank Knight. Do you know him. A great economist (in Chicago). Did some wonderful things. After I led the student revolution we could take classes in economics anywhere. And Frank Knight, at a time I was on a panel with a biologist and a physicist about science, at Michigan State, Frank Knight was on the panel also. And uhh.. as an economist. He came up to me in the interim, we had a sort of recess, and said do you think there is a behavioural science? I said no. He said neither do I. (laughter)
I: But, nevertheless, they have uhh.. journals with that name on it?
GS: Yes, it's a name. I'll agree it's a name. Terrible name.
I: Behavioural Sciences? It's frequently used. It's used by the Skinnerian inspired people.
GS: The what?
I: People inspired by Skinner and uhhh.. and all these... You know Skinner?
GS: Skinner, yes, of course.
I: Now they use the behavioural idea.
GS: Well, he's talking about the behaviour of pigeons.
I: Uhh ha. And so is doing Peter Blau.
GS: No. His generalizations are totally indefensible.
I: Uhhmm. No I don't agree with that. They are working on these things. At my University in the Psychology department, they are working...
GS: Well if you think that humans behave as pigeons, that's all right.
I: You can joke about it.. (laughter)
GS: I just won't be interested the more you talk about it. There may be dimensions, you know, where human beings behave as pigeons, you know. But I'm not concerned with that.
I: Yes?
GS: It's not my problem.
I: Uhhmm, yes.
GS: I'm sure Skinner will take care of it. Or his followers will." (Verhoeven, 1980c: 38-40)

2.3.2. The Indian case

L.E. Thomas approached a world which was totally different from his own. He was helped by his research assistant, Omji, to gain a better understanding of the peculiarities of the Veda culture, the life-world of Swami Tananda. Two important challenges he had to face: 1) the concept of truth used by the Swami; and 2) the Swamis concept of human. Both were a total denial of Western thinking and values, which had to be bridged by Thomas in order to grasp the thinking and behaviour of the Swami.

The discussion of truth started by an explanation of the inscription on a Rupee note (provided by Omji) "truth alone shall prevail".

> "T (Swami Tananda):"There are so many opponents who at first you think are going to win. What are its opponents? It is your rational thinking. The different religions. They say they are going to win. Our truth is the eternal knowledge, the Vedas. It is not known through rational thinking. It is absolute authority, which you get through tradition. That eternal knowledge supersedes all others.
>
> Suppose there is a rope and somebody understands it to be a serpent. The existence of the serpent is something imaginary. The rope is existence. The serpent exists because of the rope. The image of the serpent is dependent for its existence on the rope. So if you understand the rope, the serpent disappears. Only one thing remains. And that is the truth."

The following interview excerpt, in which we discuss his position, gives an indication both of Sw. Tananda's very sophisticated Vedic epistemology and the types of conversations we had on this and many other topics:

"I (Interviewer): It seems to me what you have done is to say that there are two classes of people: those who see the truth, and those who see falsehood. So you have made a dichotomy.

T (Sw. Tananda): Those who are seeing the rope will never be defeated by somebody who sees it as a serpent. Someday it will come that those who are thinking that it is a serpent will have to realize that what that person is saying is correct. So there is only truth. There may be some who think it is a serpent, and another group who think it is a garland. Between these two there will be a fight. But the one who is thinking it is a rope, no matter how the fight goes, will eventually win. That is reality. There are so many ways he can show that it is nothing but a rope. There is no question of anyone disproving him.

I. So he has the truth. And he is the only one who has the truth?

T. Yes. He is the only one who can have the truth. The truth in this particular case is the traditional learning that comes from the Vedas. We put the intellect under the Vedas, under the eternal knowledge. So our knowledge is always depending on the Vedas. Western man is just exploring. We don't explore; we go to the target directly.
I don't read books; they are irrelevant. If they agree with the tradition, then they tell you nothing new. If they don't agree with the tradition, then I reject them. If you are trained sufficiently, you don't have to read anything more. You can't know if something is valid except by the tradition. Otherwise you are placing yourself in the position of making a decision based on your intellect. It is blasphemy to put one's intellect above the Vedas.

I. It seems to me that you put the world in two categories: Vedic and non-Vedic. This is

dualism.

T. Don't think that the person who is thinking a rope and the person who is thinking a serpent are in dualism with each other. It is only the person who has not understood the rope, he will only go on saying the serpent is there. As soon as he understands, he is going to have the other idea. Both of them would be of equal status if both of them were thinking of imaginary things. But one is not imaginary; it is something which is the truth, and which never goes away. Once it is realized, it is realized forever.

I. Well, Swami, I see the world moving toward a time when Eastern philosophy and Western materialism are going to merge in an exciting way.

T. That is exactly what I was arguing against with the Indian slogan, "The truth alone shall prevail". There is no possibility at all that these things can merge together. They are entirely different.

I. What I would say is that each has a part of the truth.

T. There is no part of the truth in the idea of the serpent at all. If there is a rope, there is no serpent there. The serpent will have to vanish when it comes to the rope. The question of the West meeting the East does not arise. The day you see the truth, you will understand it (laughing)." (Thomas, 1995: 101-102).

Thomas stated that Tanandas world view is totally different from his; it is almost incommensurable. The Swami relies on the Vedic epistemology that higher knowledge is "not reached by systematically working up through lower knowledge, but apprehend all at once, intuitively." Nothing can change this truth, neither perception nor reasoning. Empirical verification does not change anything of the truth, an idea totally opposed to our Western thinking. Books have no value whatsoever for a good understanding of the world; only tradition (Vedas) is worthwhile for life. This is the irreconcilable cleavage between the life-world of the interviewer and the interviewee. "East is East and West is West", nothing will change that.

Although these ideas are not easily tolerated by a Westerner, Thomas was more insulted by Tanandas ethnocentric ideas about the humanity of Western people. In the next transcript the Swami denies that the interviewer is human.

"I. One thing I wanted to ask you, Swami. When we were talking about Buddhism, you said that if there is agreement with Hinduism, it is because, "they have taken it from our side." That sounds competitive, like there is exclusiveness. Most religions say that at the heart there is a unity in God; that we all worship the same God.

T. God is a fuzzy term. What one person means by it may not be the same that others mean. We may say to others that we believe the same God as theirs, but we really don't think it.

I. Well, from the other end, most religions say that we are all human beings; we are all children of the same God.

T. What do you mean by 'human'? Only a Brahman is fully human. He benefits from the karma that he is now making in his life. Only the Brahman follows Manu. You don't follow Manu.

I. You don't really mean that I'm not a human being. You respect me as a human being, and you know I don't follow Manu.

T. Why should I call you a human being? As I told you, the human being is supposed to sow his karma, and reap the fruit of it. And the capacity to sow is vested only in those who

follow Manu. And others can only enjoy it.

I. Is that really true?

T. It is very much true. That is why we say that India has a particular property. The Vedas are meant for Indians. It is by them that you can sow your karma, and reap the fruit.

I. So you and I are different. We are almost not the same species. (T nodding) I don't believe you when you say that you and I don't share the same humanity. If you really believed that you wouldn't waste your time talking with me.

T. That is only because another good person is reaping what he sowed in another lifetime. Americans lack faith in the Vedas, so they can't do the ritual. Only an Indian can be a human being.

(At this point Omji, my research assistant, told a story about a woman who went to her priest because she couldn't conceive a child. The priest taught her a mantra to help her conceive. The woman, it seems, didn't pay attention, and remained barren. But a cow was standing nearby who did pay attention to the saying of the mantra, and immediately conceived a calf. I was never quite sure how the story related to the topic of the conversation, but it relieved the tension as we all laughed).

I. Swami, I think I told you earlier that I am a Quaker. We believe that there is that of God in every person. That is the reason Quakers are pacifists - they refuse to take part in war. They are against capital punishment. They believe, and I believe, that there is that of God in each person, no matter how different or evil they might seem.

T. What you think of as God is something of your own, not what has been told by the Shastras. When you try to compare your thoughts to the Shastras, the Shastras only will win, not your thoughts.

I. What about the rest of the world, not just Americans and the West? Japan, too. They aren't Indian or Brahman. Does that mean that they aren't human beings?

T. India alone is inhabited by human beings. That is, men who can perform the Vedic rituals. Knowledge of the Vedas is necessary to produce what the world needs. The upholding of the world depends on the ritual of the Brahman. The task of the rest of the world is to respect the Brahman. And this is what has changed and brought about this *kali yuga* (black age).

I. Can you tell me what the implication of this is?

T. Other people of the world can benefit from the ritual performed by the Brahman, they can enjoy the results. But it is all made possible by the Indians. It is necessary to preserve the caste system. Our government, from Nehru on, have tried to destroy the caste system, and they are destroying India. India can never be a secular state. Shankacharyara is preparing the world to be destroyed. It is the *kali yuga*. Men in these times will come to think that it is better that the world be destroyed.

I. So people like Gandhi (Rajiv, then Prime Minister), and all that have power...

T. All of them today, they are the same. He is trying to avoid the Vedas and the orders of the gods. The caste system by which you can determine your duties. Gandhi opposes. And the caste system is the only thing that will tell you what is the service you owe to god.

I. The caste system is the key?

T. It is the key to everything. How you can know exactly what you have to do. And the new saints, Gandhi and Nehru, they were all be opposed to this. They were worse than the British; we call them the Black British. That is what the Kali (Hindu goddess of destruction) is doing.

Thomas admits that, although he was familiar with Vedic thinking, he had to realize that this extreme orthodox Veda standpoint was not part of his knowledge about this culture. The most difficult moment was when he became aware of the total denial of his value as a human being by Tananda. He could not understand why a person who did not see him as a human being could communicate with him. Moreover, he was horrified by the social and political consequences of this philosophy. According to Vedic thought, democracy is impossible and all Indian policy makers opposed to the Vedic world view should be thwarted. In spite of all these humiliations, Thomas continued his research and maintained he had a grasp of this interviewee. How is this possible?

3. How to understand each other in cross-cultural interviewing?

Understanding the interviewee in a cross-cultural context is, according to Thomas, not only a question of the "the ability to construe their symbol systems" as Geertz has argued, but also a question of mutual respect. Thomas thought at a certain moment (and he gives several indicators) that his relationship with the Swami was an I-Thou relationship, but the utterances of the Swami at the end of his stay confirm that the Swami saw this as an I-it relationship (M. Buber). This created tension between them, which was only resolved by the humour of his research assistant, Omji. Cross-cultural interviewing is always vulnerable because of the ethnocentrism of one of the parties; one party believes he belongs to a better group than the other and this impedes the relationship between both.

Although this problem might happen more in a cross-cultural situation when the interviewer and the interviewee belong to cultures opposed to each other, it might also occur in other interview situations. Some years ago, when I was interviewing Erving Goffman about his work and the structural background in which it came to be developed, he told me that it made no sense for a sociologist to spend his time doing the work I was involved in (Verhoeven, 1993). This statement probably did not hurt me as much as the statement of the Swami harmed Thomas, but it was a negation of what I was doing. And although it did not contribute to a better rapport between interviewer and interviewee, it was not a reason for me to stop the interview. I saw it as an indicator of Goffman's opinion on the main task of sociology, or better, that doing a sociology of sociology was not one of his interests. To me the emotional link with the interviewee was of less importance than it was to Thomas. Depending on the field of study and the psychology of interviewer and interviewee, mutual respect of interviewer and interviewee might have less or more relevance and might influence the rapport.
Thomas explains his capacity to understand the interviewee by relying on a distinction made by Gadamer. The latter differentiates between "the high level abstraction of world views (or paradigms) and knowledge related to practical discourse and action (praxis)". In his opinion, paradigms may be very unlike and make communication difficult. Nevertheless, this does not makes communication impossible because these paradigms are not the only part of life. Absolute knowledge is not available. We are "finite historical beings who are always 'on the way', in a world of constant flux and ambiguity". This makes the understanding of different paradigms

difficult but not impossible. We are confronted with different horizons, and the knowledge of these makes it possible to understand the other paradigms. We have an experience of a common humanity in our daily life and this enables us "to move beyond our 'blind prejudices'". This facilitates communication even when we do not share the same paradigm. Contact with other horizons or paradigms capacitates us to come to a better understanding of the other. Only through the others we attain a full understanding of ourselves. According to Thomas, this is what makes for mutual understanding of interviewer and interviewee in a cross-cultural context possible.

Although Schutz and Luckmann (1974: 289) are more interested in the question of how members of the same society come to a mutual understanding, they give an interesting example in which we may see a prefiguration of the way an interviewer and an interviewee in a cross-cultural context come to grasp each other's viewpoint.

"We had assumed that a man and a woman from different races and without a common language were stranded on a desert island. Each brings with him a different stock of socialized interpretational and motivational relevances. But a 'common' fate is imposed on them. A wide range of typical problems confronts them both. Whoever 'independently' finds the 'solution' to a definite everyday problem (or has already 'brought' it with him) can transmit it to the other person. This will probably first involve 'objectivations' on the presymbolic level. In the course of continuing we-relations, due to compelling motives and with the help of the two languages brought with them,i a common language will develop in which they can share relatively 'ideal' and 'anonymous' knowledge with each other. Thus, we now have a 'society' consisting of two people: a 'common fate,' i.e., typically similar problems, a factual social structure, in this case limited to the we-relation, a common language, and a common stock of knowledge.

This common stock of knowledge is primarily concerned with "common" and typically similar problems. It is, then, "generally valid," although the general public here consists only of two persons. Besides the elements of knowledge both share, each has a stock of subjective knowledge that is not "objectivated," partly because it may not be easy to "objectivate" but also partly because it is related to problems that are significant only for one and not for the other. To take an example: there are problems that are significant only for the woman as woman and only for the man as man. There is no urgent reason to convey the existing "solutions" to these problems. On the basis of common relevances a common quasi-social stock of knowledge is formed for subjective elements of knowledge. The fact that this is not simply the sum of subjective elements of knowledge is especially clear in this example."

In this example, it becomes obvious that two people with a different cultural background develop a common language in a we-relationship. It is this we-relationship which is one of the first experiences of children in a family that confronts them with typifications, which in principle are conceivable without language ('prelinguistic experiences') but later on are transmitted by language. "The language is a system of typifying schemata of experience, which rests on idealizations and anonymizations of immediate subjective experience" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974: 233). Language is an important device to understand the life-world. It is so important that "the largest province of lifeworldly typifications is linguistically objectivated", and changes in the social relevance of given experiential schemata are followed by changes in the meaning of a language. This linguistic experience is part of the earlier we-experience of children that is immediately linked with facial expression and gestures of the Other. Hence language appears for the child as a direct experience of his fellows. When this language has become part of the personality of the child, "it becomes to a great extent independent of the concrete we-relationship and of the immediacy of experience. Language can then provide knowledge about realities which not only transcend the current experience of the individual, but also are practically, if not also in principle, inaccessible to him" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974: 249). But since the we-experiences are different among children of different classes, nations, ethnicities, and so on, the language and the understanding of the life-world will also differ. Only in societies where the typical contexts of experience and act would be the same, where roles are not differentiated, only in these societies would the social stock of knowledge be the same. Consequently, understanding the other belonging to an other culture will be not easy, yet not impossible.

This is almost like the situation of cross-cultural interviewing. An interviewer and an interviewee who have grown up with a different stock of knowledge have the challenge of bridging this gap. They do not have the time to pass through the same stages a child goes through. They have to try to build a we-relationship, which is hindered by their different stocks of knowledge. However, they can rely on a common language, which makes it possible for them to grasp the typifications available in each culture. When this is not available, as in the Brazilian case, cross-cultural interviewing does not or only partly attains the purpose. But even when both interviewer and interviewee share the same language, as in the American and the Indian case, mutual understanding is not without problems. A common language, although it is linked with a particular life-world, is no guarantee that one will grasp everything easily. When the interviewer and the interviewee do not share the same pre-linguistic experience a more or less wide gap has to be bridged. To achieve this is the continuous challenge of cross-cultural interviewing.

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